

COMMENTARY

Irresistible joys and discouraging pitfalls in diagnosing personality disorders

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We humans seem to have an inherent urge to describe and label personalities in individuals we meet in everyday life, both professionally and personally. Unfortunately, neither lay descriptors nor psychiatric diagnoses easily capture the sense we often have of others. In fact, describing and categorizing personality and personality disorders have been among the weakest links in psychiatric nosology since the introduction of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals of Mental Disorders (DSMs)*. Even with the atheoretic, primarily descriptive approaches of *DSM-III* (published in 1980), *DSM-III-R*, and *DSM-IV*,¹ the section on personality disorders is the most problematic. Still, the inherent attraction of personality labeling is often too great to resist.

In his essay, Walling uses the descriptions of Achilles' behaviors and personality traits in *The Iliad* to diagnose him according to *DSM-IV* criteria. Although the author selects passages from the text that are consistent with his conclusion that Achilles had antisocial personality disorder, we should view this conclusion with great caution because it illustrates some of the pitfalls of personality diagnoses.

A personality disorder is an enduring and

stable pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from cultural expectations, is pervasive and inflexible, begins in early adolescence or early adulthood, and leads to distress and impairment.¹ Because personality disorders are longitudinal and stable, diagnoses based on cross-sectional examinations are fraught with difficulties. Thus, Achilles may have thought and acted as described in *The Iliad* and noted by Walling, but what do we know about his patterns of behavior throughout his life? The *DSM-IV* criteria for antisocial personality disorder require symptoms of conduct disorder (similar to adult antisocial behaviors) before age 15. Was Achilles a destructive, aggressive, deceitful child or adolescent? Without this information, it is impossible to make an accurate diagnosis.

In addition, diagnoses of personality disorders can be made only by examining the individual's behavior in the context of his culture. Although Walling describes some examples of Achilles' behavior that seem at variance with his cultural norm, without a fuller knowledge of the culture, such interpretations are suspect.

An explicit rule for diagnosing personality disorders requires that the traits and behaviors used to make the diagnosis be due not simply to the effect of transient stressors or another psychiatric disorder such as depression, mania, or anxiety disorders. Achilles' behaviors during wartime may not reflect his typical behaviors at other times. Again, the hallmark of personality and its disorders is the predictable, consistent, enduring pattern of traits and behavior, not a series of behaviors during a time of crisis. Similarly, a fixation on honor and revenge and excessive mourning could hardly qualify as obsessive-compulsive personality traits without further information about the culture, his relationship to the deceased, and so forth.

Diagnosing personality disorders by literary text is seductively interesting and creative but must be done with caution and a skeptical eye to avoid overgeneralizing from cross-sectional information.

Reference

- 1 American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press; 1994.